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News this month

A literary candidate

Dario Fo, a Nobel prize-winning Italian playwright and left-wing activist, may run in Milan's mayoral election next year. He will take part in primary elections next January, vying to become the centre-left coalition's candidate for the post. Mr Fo, whose most recent satire pokes fun at Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's conservative prime minister, has received the support of the far-left Rifondazione Comunista. But the Democrats of the Left, the leading party in the coalition, is backing Bruno Ferrante, who resigned as prefect of Milan on November 4th in order to join the race. Other candidates who have said they would run in the centre-left primaries include Milly Moratti, a member of the Green party and the city council. The election to replace Gabriele Albertini, Milan's centre-right mayor, whose second (and final) term will end next spring, is scheduled to take place in April 2006.



AP

It is 1:15 p.m.
Wednesday in Milan,
37°F/3°C
(Forecast)

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Don't breathe in

Mr Albertini and the government of Lombardy have been forced to address the high levels of **smog** in and around Milan. In October, the city passed the 100-day mark for excessive levels of PM10 (fine-particle air pollution) in the atmosphere. The European Union can impose fines on member states that exceed agreed levels of PM10 for more than 35 days in a year.

Authorities in Lombardy have pledged €550m (\$660m) over the next five years to improve the quality of air in the region. They've also imposed a limit on the hours when cars without catalytic converters can be driven and introduced a series of carless Sundays (the first will take place on November 13th). Meanwhile, Domenico Zampaglione, the Milan councillor responsible for the environment, called on local residents to turn down their heating, while Mr Albertini suggested re-examining a proposal (hitherto rejected by his centre-right government) to charge cars for driving into the city centre. Until the effects of such actions are felt, some Milanese are making use of the Green Party's free "anti-smog" kits, which include cough lozenges, masks and clothes-pegs for the nose.

Suffering for their art

Milan's musicians, singers, dancers, actors and film-industry workers joined a nationwide strike against proposed **cuts in arts funding** on October 14th. Rocco Buttiglione, Italy's minister of culture, has threatened to resign if the annual budget for the performing arts is slashed from €464m (\$560m) to €300m, as the government has proposed. The cuts would be hardest felt at La Scala, Milan's renowned opera house, and the country's 12 other heavily subsidised opera venues.

Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, suggested that some of the problems facing the country's opera houses were of their own creation and singled out La Scala for particular criticism. He claimed the theatre could get by with a staff of 400 instead of the 1,000 it currently employs. La Scala said its workforce numbered 800 and that half were musicians, ballet dancers and chorus members. Stephane Lissner, the theatre's new French director, said he hoped the government would find a solution to ensure a future for Italy's cultural projects.

A court hearing

On October 28th, a Milan court held the first in a series of hearings to decide whether to indict **Silvio Berlusconi** and 13 others on fraud charges involving Mediaset, a firm owned by the prime minister. Neither Mr Berlusconi nor any of the other defendants turned up for the hearing, which was adjourned until November 7th.

Should the court decide to indict Mr Berlusconi, a trial could potentially coincide with Italy's next general election, in April 2006. The prime minister's lawyers have asked that the case be transferred to a court in the northern Italian city of Brescia, claiming that many Milanese judges have invested in Mediaset shares, and so have a conflict of interest. For Mr Berlusconi, who maintains his innocence, the proceedings are just the latest in a string of legal challenges. In September, he was acquitted of false accounting when a court in Milan found the actions he was accused of were no longer illegal under a law approved by his government in 2001.

Ashes in the wind

More Milanese choose to be **cremated** than buried. According to figures released in October by the office of Giulio Gallera, the local politician responsible for funerals, 54% of those who died in Milan during the first nine months of 2005 had chosen cremation. In Italy as a whole, only 8% chose to be cremated in 2004. About 18,000 Milanese have signed up with the local cremation society, and some 80% of these have also requested that their ashes be dispersed in an area set aside for this purpose in the city's Lambrate cemetery.

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